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World Chronicle

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The UN Demining Expert

JOURNALISTS: Jon Leyne, BBC
Bhaskar Menon, *The Times of India*

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UN DE-MINING EFFORTS

PATRICK BLAGDEN, The United Nations De-mining Expert, discusses international efforts in assisting countries and communities in clearing mines. The largest number of mines is in Cambodia, Afghanistan and Angola. There are hundreds of different types of mines manufactured in a large number of countries. Mines are cheap and easy to make, but very deadly. They are legitimate weapons as long as they are used responsibly, with appropriate mapping and recording, and are not used against the civilian population. Mr. Blagden estimates that more than 4000 people are hurt weekly by these hidden killers worldwide. He blames makers and users of mines for the suffering and damage these lethal weapons cause to innocent victims.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

Perhaps none of the weapons man has invented is more menacing than the mine. Mines come in many shapes and sizes and are cheap. They've caused enormous human suffering. There are estimated to be more than 100 million mines spread across 56 countries in almost all continents. The United Nations has calculated that at least one mine has been laid world-wide for every 50 people on earth. How did this come about, and what can be done to save humanity from these hidden killers?

Our guest today, Patrick Blagden, is the United Nations de-mining expert. Joining me to talk to Mr. Blagden are John Leyne of the BBC and Bhaskar Menon of the Times of India. Mr. Blagden, welcome to World Chronicle.

Mr. Blagden, perhaps I've been asleep at the switch, but it seems to me awareness of the dimensions of the problem of mines, world-wide, is a fairly recent thing.

BLAGDEN: I think so. The problem is that before the shadow of the cold war was lifted very few people were aware of the monstrous damage that mines had already done in places like Cambodia and Afghanistan. I think Kuwait, too, was also a watershed, because that achieved a great deal of publicity, and people first began to realize that mines could be used in a very large-scale way; and that, too, drew attention to it. But the phenomenon of large-scale discussion about mines is, I think, fairly recent, because it certainly wasn't happening when I joined the United Nations in August of 1992.

LITTLEJOHNS: You're the de-mining expert for the United Nations. What does that entail?

BLAGDEN: It entails preparing assessments of the mine pollution problems in the countries that I am working in, which are the ones where the United Nations has an operation of some kind, and then turning these assessments into working plans for the mine clearance; getting the people -- making available people to do these, or carry out these plans, either militarily or commercially, or using one of the mine clearance non-governmental organizations that are around the place at the moment; and then trying to persuade either donors or the United Nations itself to part with some money to get the work done.

LITTLEJOHNS: Which country has the biggest problem in the United Nations orbit?

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BLAGDEN: Well, I was going to say Afghanistan, but I have recently returned from Angola, and I am now beginning to feel that Angola might have almost as great a problem as Afghanistan. There are large numbers of mines, and the estimates are between say, about 9 and 15 million. Now, all these estimates are probably wrong, but we don't know by how much; but they're as good an estimate as we can make at this time.

LITTLEJOHNS: We have some of these charming little gadgets right here on the table. This one I believe you yourself brought from Kuwait.

BLAGDEN: Yes, I did.

LITTLEJOHNS: How much would a thing like that cost, and what kind of damage can it do?

BLAGDEN: Well, I don't know how much they cost. My estimate would be that it was somewhere around the $50's mark. But this is a jumping mine; in other words, if the top crown is tilted -- and I'm afraid I've got the pins in here because there are bits that I don't want to lose -- the inside of this springs up, by about a foot and a half, and it then explodes, shedding nasty little bits of metal out to about 100 metres. And it is reckoned to be lethal to about 60 metres. This is the Valmara V-69 that is present in large numbers in places like Kuwait, for instance, and Kurdistan.

LITTLEJOHNS: Where was it manufactured?

BLAGDEN: That was manufactured by the Valsella company in Italy.

LITTLEJOHNS: This small -- and you mentioned, before we came on the air, that it's quite easy to disarm it by just turning it so -- is this a cheap model or -- ?

BLAGDEN: That is quite cheap. That again is Italian, also made by Valsella. This is the Italian VS-50, and the little access at the rear is merely to get the detonator out of it. The detonator means that there is nothing for the needle to strike if inadvertently you do press the top -- which hopefully you don't do anyway -- so the thing won't go off, once that detonator has been removed. But you have to pick it up and treat it with reasonable care before you start playing around with it.

LEYNE: These things look pretty menacing, even unarmed, here in the studio. Out on a desert, hidden under sand, they must be terrifying. Who on earth would want to go and deal with these things?

BLAGDEN: There is a group of people who, for one reason or another -- sometimes it's finance, sometimes it's because they are genuinely interested in the problem -- are willing to go and risk their lives in this way. To them, it is a challenge, and to them, they get a great deal of satisfaction out of doing the work. I don't feel

quite the same way. I have managed mine clearance, I've done relatively little myself, and I find it singularly frightening. But I think they do, at first.

LEYNE: Well, tell me, what is it like being out there in a minefield?

BLAGDEN: Lonely, I think is the answer.

LITTLEJOHNS: Lonely and scary!

BLAGDEN: Lonely and slightly scary, because I always remember that the mine is designed and is optimized so that it will kill me, and I have been trained, hopefully, so that I am optimized, so that I will defuse it. And the time will come -- and this happens to all mine clearers -- when the man and the mine meet, and either he is 100 per cent right, or he is 100 per cent wrong.

LITTLEJOHNS: How many casualties has the UN sustained in this operation, or in these operations?

BLAGDEN: I don't know the numbers. I ought to, but I'm afraid I don't know them, because we haven't been keeping a detailed record. But I think about 10 mine clearers in Afghanistan -- which is the most mature program -- I think 10 people have either been killed or injured over the last three years.

MENON: You've got a major training program now in Cambodia.

BLAGDEN: That is so, yes.

MENON: And how many people do you have working in Cambodia now?

BLAGDEN: About 1400, I think. We've trained about 2000, but the difficulty is that you can't just start mine clearing when you've trained 2000 mine clearers; you've got to have their supervisors, you've got to have their managers, you've got to have their team leaders -- all these people are an essential part of the mine clearance management pack that has to go with successful mine clearance.

MENON: The stereotype of a mine clearance person is that he actually goes out there as you describe as a lonely person actually getting the thing -- getting it in his hands and defusing it. But there's been talk recently, especially in American papers, about new technologies which can do this without people actually going out into the minefield. How close are we to realizing these technologies?

BLAGDEN: The answer to that is not very. The problem about mines is that they don't behave exactly as you think they are going to, and most of the people who have designed new technologies have not actually been in a minefield. As a result, they believe that if you put pressure on a mine, it will go off; or if you heat up a mine, it will go off; or if you try and break bits off a mine, it will become disarmed. This is not necessarily the case. If you take this mine, for instance, and you cut a bit off it, provided that the detonating mechanism is still intact, that mine is as good as ever. It may have

lost a little of its explosive power, but it will still be extremely unpleasant and possibly lethal. If you fire a rifle at it, and you get a hole in it, I'm sorry to have to disappoint you by saying that a mine with a hole in it is almost as effective as a mine without a hole in it. Mines don't necessarily go off when you press them the first time; they may go off the second time, or the third, or the fifty-first. So, when they've been in the ground and are a little old, and maybe have been exposed to a hot climate, or wet, or something like that, they begin to behave in funny ways. They don't act as they were designed to. That means that any machine that relies on them behaving as they were designed to will not work, and it will leave uncleared mines behind. And that's what's happened with many of the equipments that I tried to use in Kuwait, for instance.

MENON: How deep are they? I mean, what is the deepest in the ground that you would find a mine?

BLAGDEN: Again, I have to be cagey about the answer, because mines are normally laid about one to three inches below the ground's surface. But if you wish to be particularly -- if you wish to capture certain people, including de-miners, you lay two mines, one on top of the other, a metre down. And this means that the mine detector will probably not pick it up, but the vehicle in which the mine clearers will go will blow up both those mines, and their combined power will probably break the vehicle and the people inside, although they're a metre down.

LEYNE: It seems to me that the resources devoted to this problem around the world are just a fraction of what's needed. I mean I've heard figures of -- that you need to spend thousands and millions of dollars just to clear all the mines from Cambodia, for instance.

BLAGDEN: I think this is probably true if you look at it from a statistical point of view. But if you take Afghanistan, for instance, where the program we know a bit more about, it is reckoned that the majority of the good agricultural land, and the access to the villages, the wells, the houses, et cetera, can be cleared within the next, say, three to four years. And the program is running at about $12 million a year. It has been running for the last three years, so there you've got a seven to eight-year span at $12 million a year.

MENON: Other than committing resources to de-mining or clearing minefields, what can the international community do? Is there any kind of regulation you can put in place that will prevent the production or the distribution of these mines?

BLAGDEN: I don't know of any. There are perfectly good regulations that exist at the moment, and, I must hasten to say, I'm not the expert, in fact, on the various protocols. But I do know that they exist --

LITTLEJOHNS: You mean regulations on how they should be employed, where they can be laid down -- ?

BLAGDEN: Yes, how they should be employed, the fact that they should be laid, they should be mapped, they should be recorded, they should be fenced, they should be marked. In practice, this kind of -- hardly any of this kind of thing is done. And although, I may say, there is a --

MENON: Excuse me. Who makes these regulations?

BLAGDEN: There again, I'm sorry, I don't know. They emerged from the Geneva Convention, they emerged from various protocols arising out of that, and they were -- I think they first appeared in about 1980 to 1982, but I don't know who it was that actually drafted them.

LEYNE: What about persuading the mine manufacturers to make their mines slightly less lethal? At least have some metal in them so you can find them.

BLAGDEN: This has been tried, but many armies don't want their mines to be found. I attended a meeting a short while ago in Geneva, and the answer, by some of the nations was, "We don't want our mines to be detectable. So we don't want any metal put in them."

LEYNE: Has anybody yet made the completely non-metallic mine that is completely invisible?

BLAGDEN: I think so, but fortunately I've not yet found one. Even this little charming fellow here, which is Chinese, it's the Chinese T-72A, has only a very small metal component in it, a tiny little pin on a fiberglass spring. But that is enough. Incidentally, this metal bit here is removed when it's being laid, that's the safety pin. But even that is enough for a very sensitive electronic mine detector to pick it up. Now, there's no reason why that pin shouldn't be ceramic. It's only cost. So it would be quite easy to, within the present state of the art, to produce a mine that was entirely non-metallic.

LEYNE: So who are the villains of the piece? Should we criticize the people producing mines or exporting them? Or is it just nobody's doing anything wrong?

BLAGDEN: I think everybody's doing something wrong. You can criticize the mine manufacturers -- and there is quite a lot of criticism at the moment being waved around at them, and you can also criticize the people who lay the mines, but I really criticize the will of people to lay mines. But again, you see, I have no formula of words that I could turn round to -- to one of --

MENON: How many manufacturers are we talking about? How many are there world-wide?

BLAGDEN: I don't know. I know that they are produced in about 36 countries, so I think you could probably say there's about between 40 and 50 actual manufacturers.

LITTLEJOHNS: This crude little fellow is a homemade mine, I think you mentioned.

BLAGDEN: Yes.

LITTLEJOHNS: Where did this come from?

BLAGDEN: Now, that came from El Salvador. And that points up one of the difficulties of making a legislation that says "thou shalt not produce mines in factories." Because that one was actually produced in somebody's backyard.

LITTLEJOHNS: Rubber bands and --

MENON: But still, you can't have millions of those, whereas you can have millions of these.

BLAGDEN: I agree. But if a country is desperate enough, it will make thousands of those.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is World Chronicle. Our guest is Patrick Blagden, the UN de-mining expert.

LEYNE: What about the very latest conflict in Bosnia? What's the mine situation there? Is that going to be another huge problem for the international community?

BLAGDEN: To the best of my knowledge, yes, because reports have been coming in from time to time in all areas -- that is Croatia, Bosnia -- of indications of mines being laid in the countryside as well as being used as a harassment weapon against UNPROFOR [United Nations Protection Force].

LEYNE: What sorts of mines do they favour there, those little anti-personnel ones, or do they go for the big ones?

BLAGDEN: Alas, the Yugoslavs produced a whole range of mines of their own, and that contains all the main three types: the anti-vehicle or anti-tank mines; the little blast, anti-personnel mines, like that; the jumping, anti-personnel mines, like this one; or the static shrapnel mines, of which this is just the body.

LEYNE: I have the shrapnel here I think.

BLAGDEN: Yes, that actually comes from another mine. But these normally sit on a stake, like that, with a trip wire on the top. These are very common and have been produced by many arsenals. They're almost a direct copy of one that was produced by the Germans during the 1945 war. But you get the equivalent of all these in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

LEYNE: Any figures yet?

BLAGDEN: No. No, but the president of Croatia stood up and stated that he had no less than three million mines in Croatia alone that needed clearing.

MENON: One of the things that's always struck me as particularly diabolical are the people who design this. Obviously, they're people of at least some basic education, and of science.

LITTLEJOHNS: A bit more than basic, I think!

MENON: And -- well, more than basic, yes! -- and in Afghanistan, if you remember, they had a mine which was designed like a toy so the children would pick it up. What kind of people -- have you ever thought about that, have you ever tried to talk to these people?

BLAGDEN: I have talked to these people, because during -- it is fairly commonly known that I had a service background before I came to the United Nations, in fact, and part of that was spent in research, in research of weapons. And the weapons engineers are extremely articulate. They are very nice, very ordinary people with houses and mortgages and wives and children and families, and they are just like ordinary -- any ordinary family man you'd meet, anywhere. They seem to manage to have a disconnect with the weapon they work on, which becomes almost a sort of end in itself, and the effect it will have on the human being. It perhaps is just as well that they have, otherwise nobody would ever design weapons, let alone produce them.

LEYNE: I wondered, is this a sort of modern strategic development that mines are used so much? Because I can't imagine there were quite so many mines laid in the world wars, or before them. Is it some nature of the way people are fighting wars these days?

BLAGDEN: I'm a little more cynical than that, and I say that it's because they're so damned cheap. A mine like this is probably somewhere around three dollars. You can buy them secondhand, and I noticed that one particular nation was selling off all its stocks, or a high proportion of its stocks of mines, and these were coming at one dollar each. And needless to say, they were bought up like hotcakes, like the hotcakes they resemble.

MENON: How does that market work? I mean what do they do, advertise in The New York Times?

BLAGDEN: I don't really know, because, I mean, my job is pulling them up, not buying them! But all I know is that there was a --

MENON: Is this kind of sale going on now?

BLAGDEN: Oh, yes, I mean there are sales going on the whole time. But the mines are almost, sort of, flung in as an added extra, "Oh, have a case of mines as well,

old chap," as an incentive. I think the whole thing is bizarre, and it would be laughable if it wasn't so appallingly sad. Because one of the many little, sort of back-of-the-envelope calculations I've done is that an anti-personnel mine is 10 times more likely to kill or maim a civilian than it is to kill or maim a soldier.

LEYNE: And how much does it cost -- you said you could buy one of those for one dollar -- how much does it cost to get rid of it?

BLAGDEN: Well, I estimate somewhere between $300 to $1,000. By the time you've got a large scale team, trained it, insured it, provided it with compensation, management, support, medical and casuvac -- casualty evacuation. By the time you add all that together, it is a very expensive proceeding. And I'm afraid to say that we do that, because, although you can do it much more cheaply by hiring somebody, handing him a mine detector, and saying, "Right, go forth into the fields," and then waiting till there's a bang, we don't do that in -- well, I sincerely hope we will never do that in the United Nations.

For instance, in northern Somalia a team of 49 people were brought together to carry out mine clearing, and I think they killed or maimed 17, whereupon they very wisely stopped. We make sure that everybody is as trained as well as we possibly can, and we've developed the training syllabi that are needed for it.

LEYNE: Well, those sort of figures are going to completely hobble the recovery of some of these war-ravaged countries, I mean countries like Cambodia, Angola, Mozambique?

BLAGDEN: Well, it depends what you mean by complete. I'm sorry to have to put it conditionally like that, but I said, for instance, in Afghanistan it was about a seven-year program to get most of the areas, most of the productive areas clear. And this is what I call humanitarian de-mining. And I think at this point, I must say that we must remember that mine clearance is actually a humanitarian activity and not a peacekeeping activity.

MENON: In Kuwait, I understand that the allied forces laid entire minefields by shelling. It seems you have shells which actually distribute mines. And that this is a particular problem. How are you dealing with that?

BLAGDEN: I've never found extensive minefields that were spread by shells. I've found a lot of other weapons that were spread by shells, and a lot -- this was when I was in Kuwait -- and a lot of weapons that were dropped by airplane. But there was only one specific instance of mines being dropped by airplane. And this was an American air-delivered -- it was a thing called the "gator" mine, which is really quite large. But that was meant to have a self-destruct capability.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Blagden, do you have any casualty figures from the explosions of mines in countries where the UN has been involved in de-mining operations?

BLAGDEN: Only, as I said, for -- in Afghanistan -- what do you mean, amongst the mine clearers themselves, or amongst the people?

LITTLEJOHNS: No, no, among the people who have been affected by the presence of the mines, people who have had their legs blown off and maybe have been killed, et cetera, et cetera.

BLAGDEN: Well, in Cambodia, they reckon they have about 3000 casualties per month. And I have done a very vague back-of-the-envelope assessment that as many as 4000 a week in total might be affected by mines in that way. But I am including --

LITTLEJOHNS: You mean world-wide?

BLAGDEN: World-wide. And I am including areas outside the present UN remit, such as, for instance, Ethiopia, such as the Far East, Laos, Vietnam. And that works out to about one every 15 minutes of the daylight hours of every working day.

MENON: Other than the civilian casualties which are so great, has the use of mines -- does it have a military value? Do you think it's been militarily effective in these conflicts?

BLAGDEN: I think it probably is, yes. I don't think that people who lay the mines, militarily, are ever fully aware of the effects that the mines will have, even on their own soldiers, because it's a depressing fact that many armies lose quite a number of their own soldiers to anti-personnel mines. But they are, still, very much in demand as a weapon in the armories of most armies at present. Again, this was discussed at the meeting I recently went to in Geneva, and the armies were adamant that they needed mines.

MENON: Well, what -- how do they justify it? Is it purely the terroristic effect it has on civilians, or does it have a specific tactical value in warfare?

BLAGDEN: It has a specific tactical value because it is a protection against either infantry or tank attack on defensive positions, and is well used for that. And, I might say, when used, as I say, responsibly -- in other words, the minefield is marked, recorded, and mapped, those maps are held centrally and then returned to the nation in which the mines may be, or better still, the mines are removed when they have no further tactical or strategical significance -- then I believe the mine is a legitimate weapon. When mines are used as terror weapons, when they're put by wells in order to kill people trying to water their flocks, when they're put on pneumatic tracks, when they're put into houses to terrorize people returning, returning refugees, so the first

thing they do when they go into what remains of their house is to get blown up, that I believe has no military significance whatsoever, and it is just the use of the mine as a terror weapon. And, unfortunately, it is quite prevalent today and will probably be increasing.

LITTLEJOHNS: When were anti-personnel mines first used, in World War Two?

BLAGDEN: I believe they were first used in World War Two. That was the first time I ever heard of them, anyway. And they were used mainly to protect anti-tank mines from being removed by engineer troops. And, as a result, they had a very limited use, really, and they were only an adjunct to the anti-tank mine. Since then, I'm afraid, they've had a -- no pun intended -- a life of their own.

LEYNE: What about the diplomatic activity? Last year we saw the General Assembly for the first time approving this voluntary ban on exports. Is that going to have any good at all? What would you like to see happen?

BLAGDEN: I'd like to see much more, or many more, teeth to all these things, but it's like all these other resolutions. What do you say to your warlord? What do you say to all the gentlemen who at the moment are negotiating with a smile just off their faces, knowing perfectly well that every single peace agreement is going to last three minutes and not much more? How do you convince many of the customers that the United Nations has to deal with that they must act honestly and they must act responsibly towards the people of their own country when they're quite prepared to stand by and watch them starve?

LEYNE: Perhaps, at least, you can persuade the so-called civilized world not to sell weapons to people like that.

MENON: Especially since the civilized world produces them.

BLAGDEN: It produces many of them, yes. Although I don't know where the demarcation line comes between the civilized and uncivilized; as far as I'm concerned, anybody producing anti-personnel mine is uncivilized! But, I mean, if you take a mine like this, for instance: now, the exporters of this particular mine don't export mines. What they do is they export plastic components. And these plastic components are sent off in boxes of plastic components. And then they go to another country. And then somebody in that other country screws them together again. Oh, horror, they make a mine! Good heavens! "Now I never, I never exported mines, I just exported plastic components, but some terrible chap in a faraway country has just turned them into a mine." Oh, shock!

LITTLEJOHNS: What about the anti-tank mines? Is the UN involved in disarming them also?

BLAGDEN: Oh, yes. Very much so, because in fact they stopped being anti-tank mines, per se, and they've become anti-vehicle mines. And they are just as -- well, they're more lethal even than anti-personnel mines in that they affect so many more people. And that is something that I think we tend to neglect. And that's another reason why I find that neglect of mines is so -- quite appalling. On I think it was June the 5th last year in Somalia, there was that tragic time when the Pakistani soldiers were killed in Somalia. A very short while before that, 19 people were killed and 13 injured in a single anti-tank mine explosion in Mozambique.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Blagden, that's all the time we have. Thank you for joining us on this edition of World Chronicle. Our guest has been Patrick Blagden, the UN de-mining expert. He was interviewed by John Leyne of the BBC and Bhaskar Menon of The Times of India.

I'm Michael Littlejohns, thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of World Chronicle.

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